

VZCZCXRO9307

RR RUEHAG RUEHAST RUEHDA RUEHDBU RUEHDF RUEHFL RUEHIK RUEHKW RUEHLA
RUEHLN RUEHLZ RUEHNP RUEHPOD RUEHROV RUEHRS RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHRA #0310 1541149
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 031149Z JUN 09
FM AMEMBASSY RIGA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5875
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS RIGA 000310

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [PHUM](#) [LG](#)

SUBJECT: LATVIAN ELECTION CAMPAIGNS FUELED BY ETHNIC TENSION

Ref RIGA 122

¶1. Summary: Ethnic identity remains an important -- and perhaps decisive -- factor in the June 6 municipal and European Parliament elections in Latvia. Several parties have based their campaigns on divisions between Latvians and Russians and their sometimes divergent political goals. Ethnic politics are an evergreen theme in Latvian elections, but this election may hinge on the issue more than most, as parties lack substantive programs for economic recovery and fall back on the emotions of ethnicity. End summary.

¶2. As in previous elections, several parties have based their campaigns on the ethnic divisions of Latvians and Russians. The most important races are in Riga, which is fairly evenly split between Russian speakers and Latvian speakers. Russian-speakers may swing the vote.

¶3. Some parties base their entire campaign on identity politics. The party For Fatherland and Freedom (TB/LNNK) has run ads directed at its ideological rival Harmony Centre --a party most popular amongst the Russian speaking population (see reftel). Their latest ad featured a cartoon of Latvian coalition politicians fighting each other to get the milk of a cow marked "Latvia." Once the Latvian politicians have killed one another for the milk, Russian politicians saunter in and walk away with the cow.

¶4. On the other side of the spectrum, PCTVL, a Russian speakers' party, ran ads urging Russians to vote for their candidates for European Parliament in order to put 'our people' in Brussels. PCTVL's explicit goals include strengthening the status of the Russian language in Latvia and the EU, cooperating with the Russian Orthodox Church, and promoting Russian economic ties with the EU. PCTVL candidate and current MEP Tatjana Zdanoka is essentially running as a single-issue candidate, promising to focus on helping Russian-speaking non-citizens gain voting rights in Latvia, although this remains a national, not EU, decision.

¶5. Even other parties that are not playing the ethnic card quite as overtly as TB/LNNK and PCTVL are focusing their campaigns on only one of the two ethnic/language groups. The one candidate who is actively courting voters regardless of ethnicity is former transport minister Ainars Slesers of Latvia's First Party/Latvia's Way (LPP/LC), who has carried out a massive and colorful campaign in both Latvian and Russian. In his campaign events, he uses both languages interchangeably. Slesers is the most popular candidate for mayor, largely because anywhere from 35 - 45 percent of Russian voters say they support him. No other candidate comes close to this broad appeal. This is largely due to Slesers' personality and his ability to project himself as an optimistic, pragmatic hands-on politician. Polls show that Russian support for Slesers personally does not necessarily translate into Russian support for his party, making it difficult to predict how well he will do.

¶6. Harmony Center's candidate for mayor, Nils Ushakovs, is also making some forays into Latvian-language media and his party has a few campaign ads in Latvian. But his inter-ethnic efforts are much more limited and less likely to be successful than Slesers'. This is mainly because the party is running Alfreds Rubiks for European Parliament and Rubiks' support of the 1991 putsch in Moscow and his ardent opposition to restoring Latvia's independence makes him

anathema to the vast majority of ethnic Latvians.

[¶](#)7. Comment: Given Latvia's economic situation and the lack of substantive policy proposals, it is not surprising that parties are falling back on ethnic issues to appeal to voters. That does not, however, make it any less disappointing.

ROGERS